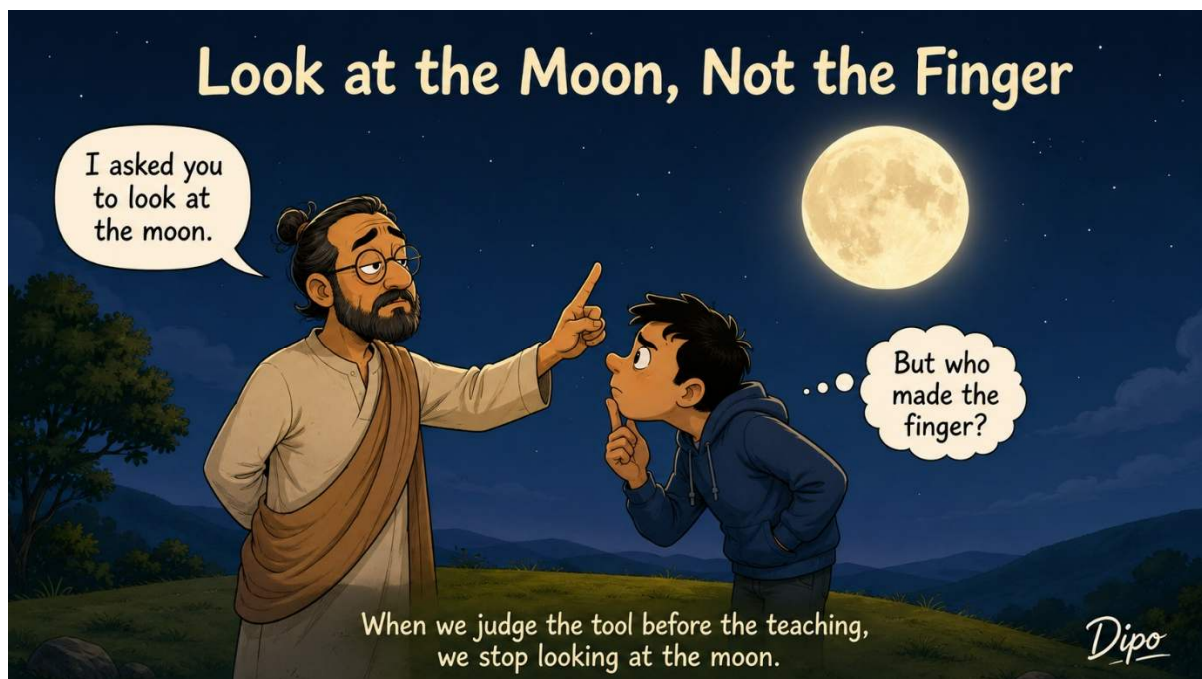




by Dipobhāsadhamma - 2026

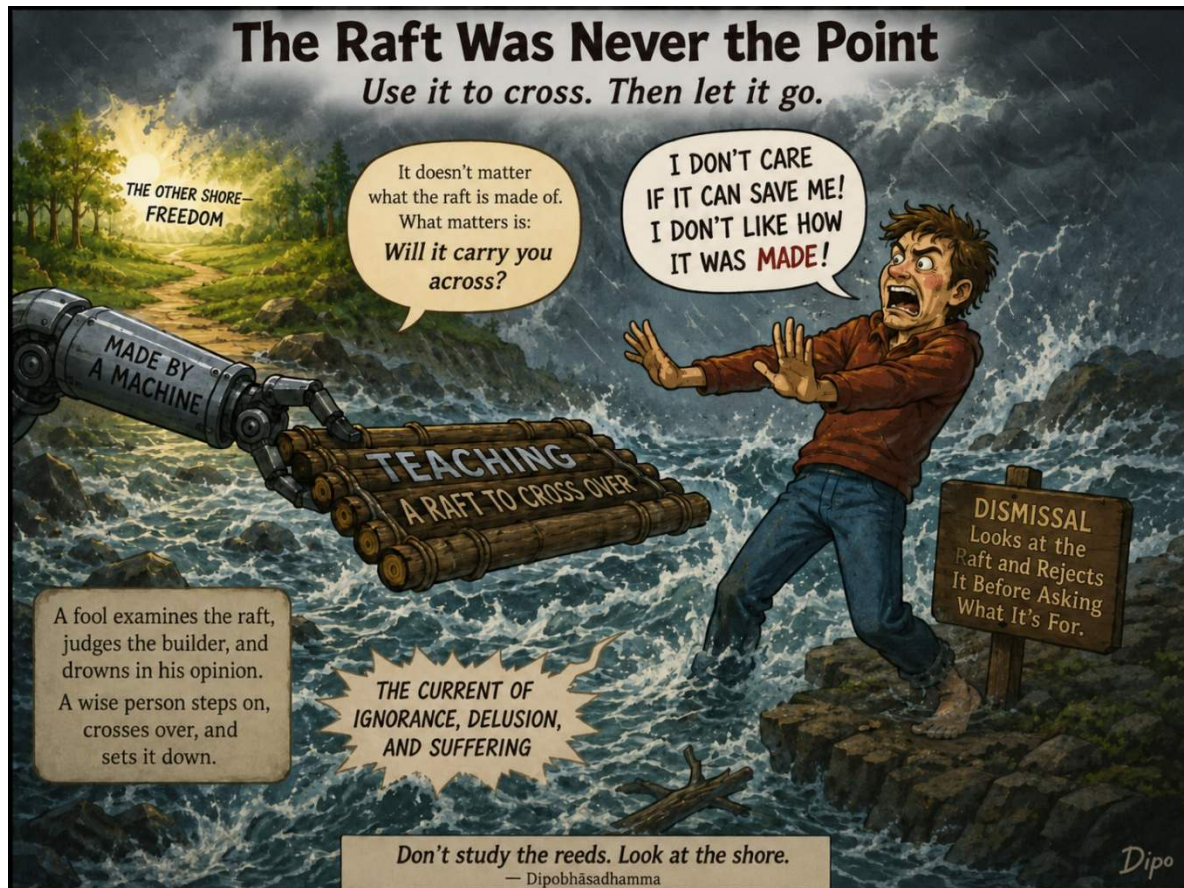
A teacher once held up a finger and pointed to the moon. A student stared at the teacher's finger instead — its shape, its fingernail, whether it trembled — and never looked up. "Why are you looking at my finger," the teacher said. "I asked you to look at the moon."



Plainly: the finger was never the point. It was never meant to be admired, defended, or judged. It was meant to be looked past. So, when people reject a teaching image the moment they learn a machine had a hand in making it, checking the tool before they check the message, they have made the same mistake as that student. They are studying the finger. They have stopped looking at the moon.

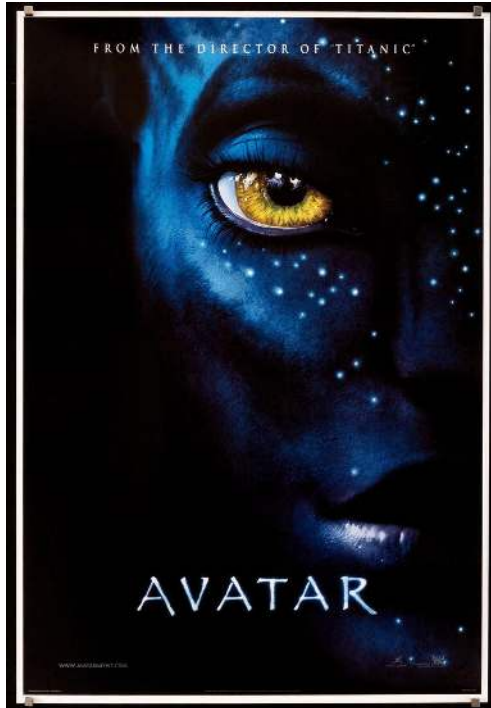
The Buddha made the same point with a story about a man who builds a raft from branches and reeds to cross a dangerous river. He reaches the far shore safely. If he then loved that raft so much that he strapped it to his back and carried it everywhere for the rest of his life, would that be wisdom? No. The raft did its work the moment it got him across. Now it can be set down.

The Buddha said his own teachings were exactly this kind of raft — a means of crossing, not a thing to be worshipped, defended, or carried as identity.



A teaching image is a raft too. It does not matter what the raft is made of; reeds tied by a human hand or reeds tied by a machine. What matters is one question only: did it carry you to the other shore? Did it open your mind? If a viewer spends their attention arguing about the reeds and never asks what the raft was built to carry them across to, the raft has failed them, not because of what it was made of, but because they refused to get on it.

None of this is a blanket defense of every use of a machine. AI can absolutely be misused — to deceive, to impersonate, to flood the world with images that carry no message at all, only noise. That much is real, and worth staying alert to. But used with care, AI can also be a fast, useful way to build the background a teaching needs — the field, the sky, the path, the light — so that a teacher's actual words can rest on something visually calm enough to hold a mind still for a moment. A background image is only ever the finger. It was built to be looked past, toward whatever it is quietly holding up. The moon — the context, the content, the teaching itself — is what the background exists to serve. Judging a message by the tool that built its background is like judging what someone said by the color of the chair they happened to be sitting in when they said it.



Millions of people paid to watch the *Avatar* movies; films built almost entirely out of computer-generated pixels, not one frame of it untouched by machine, and walked out of the theater moved, sometimes in tears. Nobody organized a boycott because the blue skin, the floating mountains, and the alien forest were rendered rather than filmed. Yet show a single still image, touched only in part by artificial intelligence, alongside a teaching from the Buddha, Pema Chödrön, or Dipobhāsadhamma and a portion of the audience will reject it on sight, not because the teaching is false, but because a machine had a hand in the picture beside it or the background used behind the teaching.

The same confusion runs the other way too, and it doesn't require any machine at all. Take a quieter example: the painting below of a moonlit dirt path curving up through a dark field toward a bright, veiled moon, painted by Dipobhāsadhamma. From start to finish, the painting took

several months. Now, the point of using my painting, is that a viewer can stand in front of it and feel something move, the pull of the light, the quiet invitation of the path, and only afterward learn that I only picked up a brush less than a year ago, and worked on an inexpensive canvas, using paint that wasn't the finest available. Because this painting was not done by Turner or Constable becomes another point of contention. Perhaps the message of the painting is dismissed because a person's opinion of the painter. Does any of those discoveries change what moved in the viewer a moment earlier? It shouldn't. And if it does, the very same mechanism is at work as with the AI-touched image, only wearing more respectable clothes: credentials, pedigree, price, and fame are just another kind of source information, and treating them as a verdict on the work itself, rather than as one more thing to notice and set aside, is the identical error running in the opposite direction.



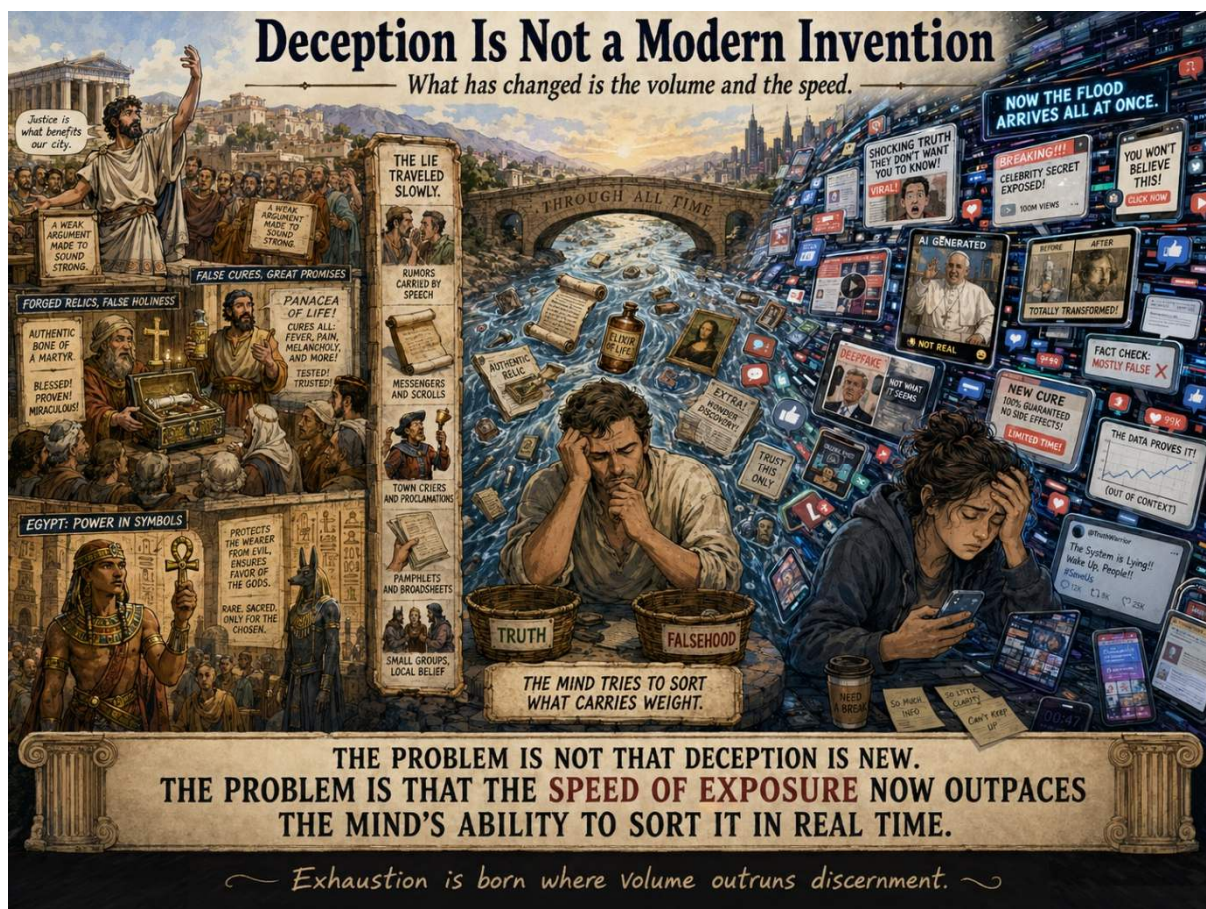
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One person dismisses a picture for having too much machine in its past. Another dismisses a painting for having too little pedigree in its maker. Both have stopped at the finger.

These inconsistencies are worth sitting with, because together they expose something more interesting than hypocrisy. They expose a confusion between two acts that feel identical in the moment but are not the same act at all: **discernment**, and **dismissal**. Discernment asks a question and stays open to the answer. Dismissal has already decided the answer before the question is asked. Learning to tell these two apart, in ourselves, in the moment we're doing it, may be the whole of the work.

Deception is Not a Modern Invention

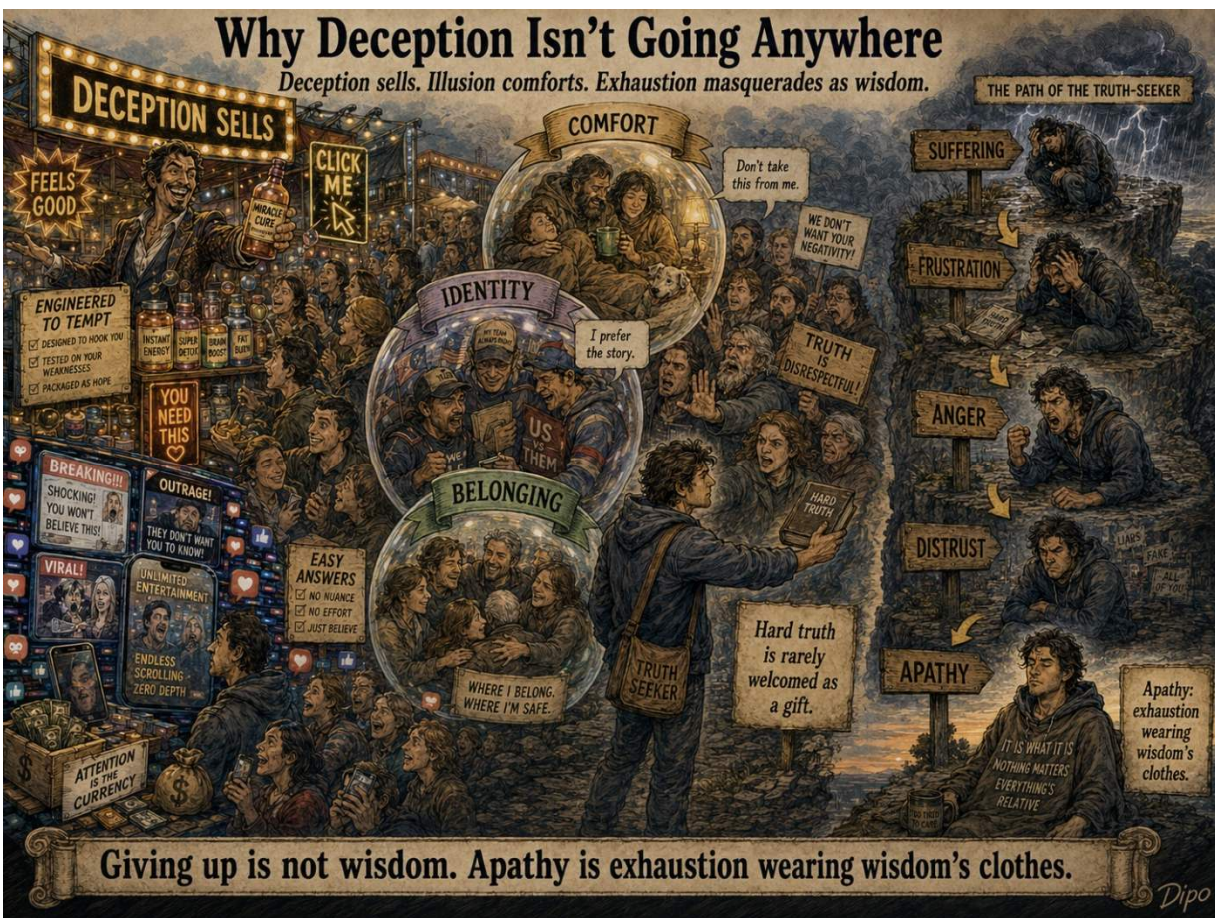
It's tempting to believe that AI, Photoshop, and algorithmic feeds have introduced something genuinely new into the world: deception itself. They haven't. Human beings have been building illusions to mislead other human beings since long before any of these tools existed. Rhetoric was studied and taught in the ancient world specifically to make the weaker argument appear the stronger. Forged relics were sold to pilgrims for centuries. Patent medicines, painted labels, and false promises predate photography by a long distance. Trompe l'oeil painters spent entire careers perfecting the art of fooling the eye, and nobody called it a moral crisis, they called it skill.



What's different now isn't the presence of deception. It's the **volume and the velocity**. In earlier centuries, a convincing lie had to travel slowly, by mouth, by pamphlet, by rumor, giving the mind at least some time to catch up with it, compare it against experience, and sort out what held weight. Today, deceptive and authentic content arrive in the same unbroken stream, at the same speed, indistinguishable in the first instant of contact. The problem was never that people, in the past, were better at spotting falsehood. The problem is that the sheer rate of exposure has outpaced the mind's capacity to sort it in real time. That mismatch, not the deception itself, is what makes the present moment feel so acutely exhausting.

Why Deception Isn't Going Anywhere

There are two plain reasons the flood won't recede on its own. First, deception sells, this has always been true and remains true regardless of the tool used to produce it, whether that tool is chemistry engineering flavor into food stripped of nutrition, or software engineering an image to move an emotion it hasn't earned. Second, and more quietly: many people are attached to their own illusions and have no wish to surrender them. Comfort, identity, and belonging often live inside stories people already hold dear, and a hard truth arriving to disturb a beloved illusion is rarely welcomed as a gift.



For a person who genuinely cares about what's true, who is tired of being misled and wants firmer ground to stand on, these two facts, over time, produce a familiar progression: suffering, frustration, anger, distrust, and, for some, a final settling into apathy. Giving up looks, at that point, like the reasonable response. It is not. Apathy is not wisdom wearing a calm face. It is exhaustion wearing wisdom's clothes.

What the Buddha Actually Taught About Sources

There's a well-known teaching, often summarized as "don't just believe things because someone told you to," that gets invoked constantly and understood only by half. In the *Kalama Sutta*, the Buddha was asked by a confused village how to tell true teachers from false ones, since so many traveling ascetics arrived contradicting one another. His answer is usually remembered only for its first half: don't accept a teaching merely because it comes from religious scripture, from tradition, from a respected teacher, or from clever reasoning. Considering the source, in other words, is not naive, it's the beginning of wisdom.

But the instruction has a second half that gets dropped far more often than it gets kept: don't *reject* a teaching for those same reasons either. Not "believe nothing from any source you distrust," but *test the thing itself*, observe whether it leads, when actually lived, toward greater harm or greater welfare, whether it holds up against your own experience and the experience of the wise. The source is a reasonable place to start asking questions. It was never meant to be the place where the questioning ends.

Outright dismissal, deciding a teaching is worthless because it once passed through hands, or software, or a publisher you distrust, quietly does the very thing the *Kalama Sutta* warns against. It just does it in reverse. Blind acceptance of a source is one error. Blind rejection of a source is the same error wearing the opposite coat.

The Narrow Road Between

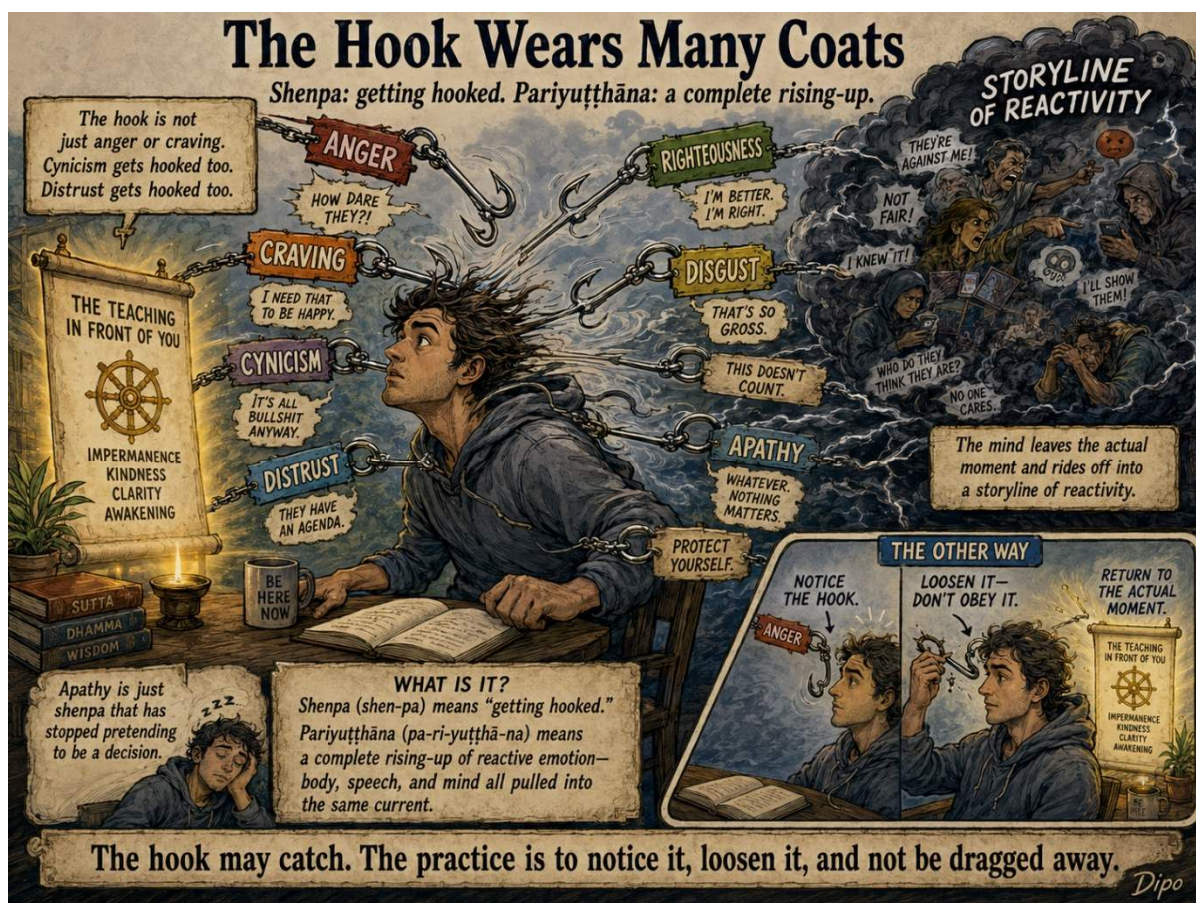
So, what does real discernment look like, in practice, once the reflex to simply trust or simply reject has been set down? It looks like a habit of asking a different question than the one most people reach for automatically. Not *who made this, and do I approve of them*, but *what is this actually saying, and does it hold up?* Does the claim survive contact with evidence? Does the image, the argument, the product, serve the wellbeing of the person receiving it, or only the interests of whoever produced it? These are answerable questions. "Do I like or dislike the source" is not a question at all, it's a verdict pretending to be an inquiry.

This is a narrow road precisely because both ditches on either side of it are so inviting. One ditch is gullibility, swallowing whatever arrives, glossy and confident, because checking feels like too much effort. The other ditch, the one modern fatigue tends to produce, is reflexive suspicion, rejecting whatever arrives from any source already filed under "not to be trusted," because rejecting feels like

protection. Both ditches offer the same relief: the relief of no longer having to look closely. Only the road between them requires the harder, sustained work of actually looking.

The Hook Wears Many Coats

This is where an old thread comes back around. *Shenpa*, Pema Chödrön's word for getting hooked, describes a tightening, a charge, a moment the mind gets seized and rides off into reactivity. It's easy to imagine shenpa only as anger or craving. But people become hooked by cynicism and distrust too. The reflexive dismissal of anything touched by a source we've decided to distrust *feels* like discernment in the moment it happens, righteous, protective, earned, but it carries the identical signature: the tightening, the closing down, the mind that has already left the actual object in front of it and gone somewhere else. Apathy, in the end, is simply shenpa that has stopped bothering to disguise itself as a decision at all.

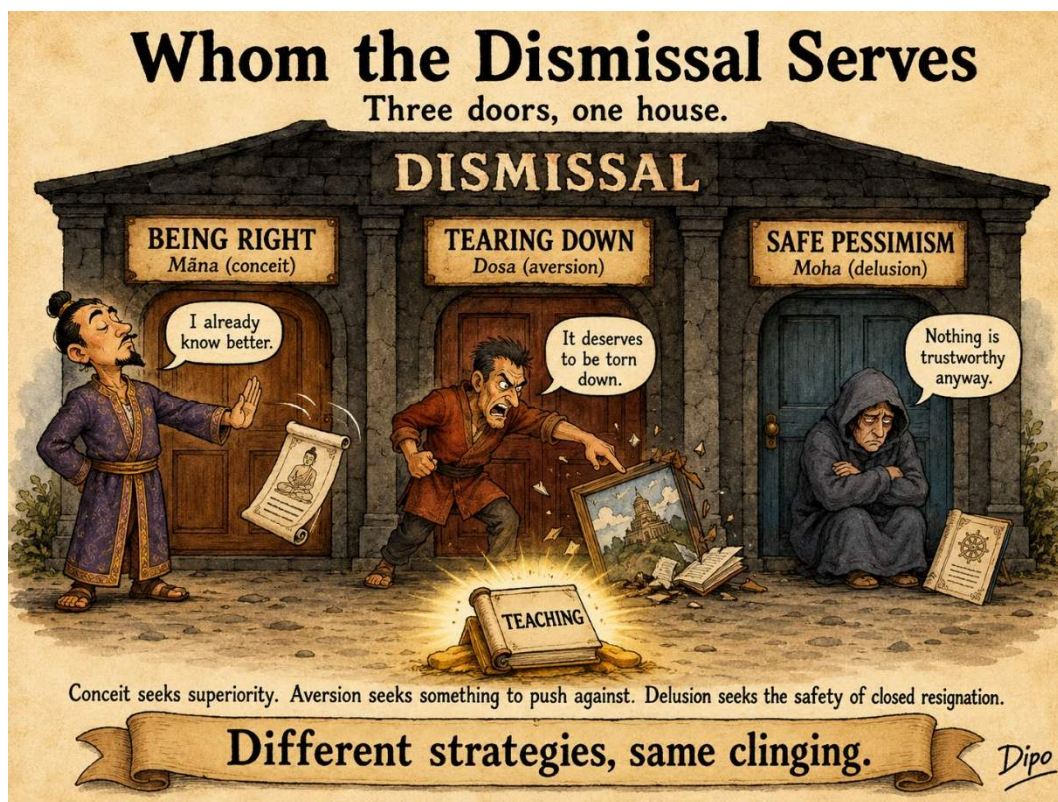


Pema Chödrön names what happens in that moment of stopping. She calls it shenpa — "getting hooked." The Pali word "pariyuṭṭhāna" is the nearest equivalent to shenpa. Pariyuṭṭhāna means a complete rising-up; a complete absorption. It is the sudden tightening you feel when something snags you: irritation, righteousness, disgust, a flash of "this doesn't count." In that instant the mind leaves the actual moment and rides off into a storyline of reactivity, and the teaching in front of it is

lost. Pema's point is not that the hook is avoidable; habituated minds get hooked, that is simply what they do. Her point is that the hook can be noticed the moment it catches, and loosened, rather than obeyed.

Whom the Dismissal Serves

But shenpa never travels alone; it always has a job to do. Ask what job it's doing for each of the people described so far, and three different assignments come into focus, though the Buddha would have recognized all three as the same hire. Some people dismiss a teaching because dismissal proves them right, and being right, in that moment, is worth more to them than the teaching itself. This is *māna*, conceit, one of the oldest fetters named in the Buddha's teachings, not simple arrogance, but the subtler need to stand a little above whatever is put in front of them, since agreement risks feeling smaller. Others don't dismiss so much as they habitually tear down. For them, criticism has become identity, home ground, the one place they reliably feel capable and sharp. Aversion (*dosa*), rehearsed long enough, stops needing a fresh object; it just needs something, anything, to push against. And some fall into a pessimism so complete that it forecloses its own correction, every new teaching arriving pre-judged, because their conclusion, that nothing is trustworthy, that everyone is lying, that hope is naive, was reached long ago and no longer bothers to check its evidence. This is *moha* wearing the costume of wisdom: an ignorance so thorough it cannot see itself as ignorance, mistaking exhaustion for insight.



Three different doors, one house. Whether the dismissal shows up dressed as being right, or as the pleasure of tearing something down, or as a settled and comfortable pessimism, none of it was ever really about the teaching, the painting, or the picture on the screen. Each is a different strategy for protecting the same thing: a self that needs, in that instant, to feel superior, powerful, or safely resigned rather than open. The Buddha would not have needed to examine the object being dismissed at all to diagnose what was happening. He would have looked only at what the dismissal was doing for the person doing it, and called it by its ordinary name: clinging, dressed up as judgment.

The Book and the Publisher

Return, for a moment, to the simplest version of the point. Imagine dismissing the value of a book written by Pema Chödrön, or a careful translation of the Buddha's own words, because the publisher who printed it is one you happen to distrust. No one would call that discernment. Everyone would recognize it, instantly, as a category error, mistaking the printer for the author, the distribution for the content. The book is the moon. The publisher is only ever the finger.

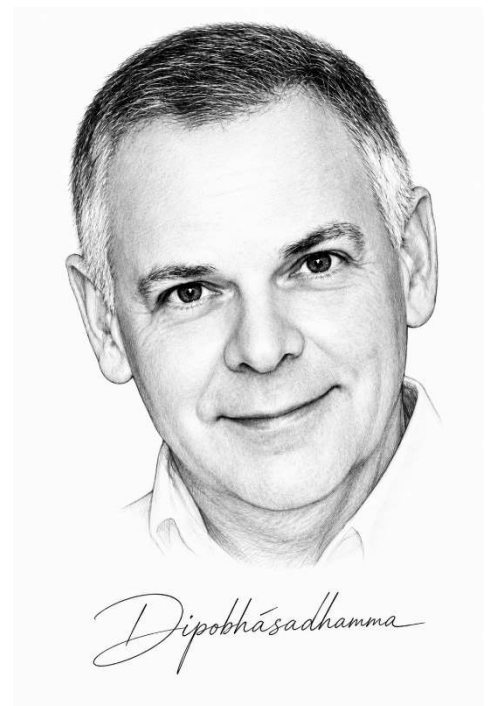
The tools of this era, AI, Photoshop, a camera, a paintbrush, a printing press, are all, without exception, fingers. Some point honestly. Some point to deceive. Telling the difference is real work, and it is worth doing carefully; the Buddha himself said so. But once that work is done, once the source has been considered, weighed, and set down, the responsibility that remains belongs entirely to the one looking. Not to keep interrogating the finger forever, long after it has told you everything it can. To lift the eyes, at last, and look at the moon.

About the Author

Dipobhāsadhamma writes from the quiet meeting point of deep study and stillness. His academic training — spanning ancient history, archaeology, anthropology, law, physics and Egyptology — gave him a lasting habit of reading past the surface of a thing to what actually produced it, a habit that now shapes how he reads the Pali texts, teachings, and even a single photograph.

His path in the Dhamma began nearly twenty years ago in the Zen tradition, where his original preceptor gave him the Vietnamese Zen name Thích Minh Đăng. Over the years that followed, his practice moved from Zen into the Theravada tradition, where the Venerable Vijayadhamma of the Bodhi Gaya Temple in India gave him the name he writes under now, Dipobhāsadhamma. That long passage between traditions — two potential ordination names, two lineages, two ways of holding the same question — is part of what gives his writing its particular attention to the difference between a teaching's vessel and its substance.

He is a teacher in the Buddhist tradition, affiliated with the Panna Foundation for Dhamma Studies, and his years of formal Pali study, grown out of that training, ground his writing in the texts themselves rather



than in commentary about them — his essays move through the Pali Canon and Abhidhamma psychology with the same patience they once moved through excavated layers and legal texts, chasing a single thread until it either holds or breaks. He is the author of six books on the Dhamma, among them “The Buddha: New Perspectives”, “Neuronal Dukkha”, “Handbook for Living the Noble Eightfold Path”, and “A Handful of Leaves — Dhamma Poems”. His central preoccupation, across this body of work, is a simple and stubborn one: the difference between looking at a thing and looking past it to what it's pointing toward — the finger and the moon, in whatever form that koan happens to take.